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Television and the Irish language

Triona Qui

Introduction

The controversy which greeted the announcement by Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht Michael D. Higgins of the forthcoming establishment of Teilifis na Gaeilge (TnG) – particularly in view of its cost – has once again put the issue of Irish language television broadcasting under the spotlight.

Critics see the new station as an expensive white elephant: some because it seems to constitute a return to the days when Irishness was equated with 'Gaelicness', and others because they believe that Irish language policies would be more effectively and efficiently served if a three hour time-slot for Irish language programming were initiated on Network 2, availing of existing expertise and experience within RTE as well as reaching a wider audience.

Not so, say supporters of the new station. RTE, after over thirty years of experience in the field, has signally failed to live up to its own stated commitments to the Irish language, far less to the demands of the Irish language lobby. Besides, they argue, the new station should not replace existing output of Irish language programmes on RTE but rather complement them, thus ensuring a genuine choice and range of programming for Irish speakers of all ages, language competence and interests.

This article explores the extent to which this defence of the new station is justified in the light of RTE's past performance with regard to the level, range and scheduling of television programmes in the Irish language. It also examines the decision to establish the new station in the light of broader trends in both broadcasting and language policy, and the extent to which Teilifis na Gaeilge is likely to be able to satisfy the diverse and sometimes contradictory objectives which have been set for it.

Methodology

Despite the considerable criticism levelled at RTE over the years in respect of its Irish language television output, there has been a surprising lack of comprehensive and comparable data compiled either by RTE or its critics that offers a long-term overview of the station's performance.

The analysis of RTE's performance in this article is based on an examination of the *RTE Guide* at five year intervals over the period 1963-1993. For each of the seven sample years, I examined the Irish television schedules for the first full week in January, March, May, July, September and November (in order to eliminate seasonal variations). The information for the six weeks was then averaged in order to arrive at a reasonably representative overview for each of the sample years. The criteria analysed were as follows: (i) average weekly Irish output; (ii) Irish output as a percentage of total television output; (iii) range of Irish language programmes; and (iv) scheduling of Irish language programmes.

For the purpose of this analysis, I have defined 'Irish Output' as including programmes such as *Trom agus Éadrom*, although it could be argued that the English content of programmes like this is such that to describe them as bilingual is stretching matters somewhat.

RTE's performance has been criticized on two levels: firstly, quantity or output, which is relatively easy to measure; secondly, the quality of programmes which is more subjective and therefore more difficult to assess. My analysis of the range and scheduling of programmes in Tables 2, 3 and 4 gives some indication of the non-quantitative aspects of RTE's Irish language performance as well as the consistency of the station's policies over the years. I also look briefly at audience figures for Irish language programming to assess how effective these policies have been and the level of viewership for which TnG will be competing.

The 1960s

From the establishment of RTE in 1961, the television station faced a number of difficulties in respect of its obligations towards the Irish language imposed under the 1960 Broadcasting Authority Act. Although the RTE Authority confirmed its commitment to using 'all reasonable means to extend the use of Irish in television programming', it also pleaded the danger of going 'too far ahead of the level of public acceptance or antagonizing large sections of the audience'. While language supporters perceived television as a means of awakening enthusiasm among the Irish population for the language, the Authority was less sanguine about the level of tolerance among the general public for large doses of programmes in Irish. A further difficulty was, and remains, the station's dependence

on commercial revenue to support a large proportion of its activities... to retain this revenue, its programmes in general must have considerable audience appeal.

(RTE, *Annual Report*, 1963:10)

Nevertheless, in 1966 the Authority, in a statement issued for the guidance of staff, emphasized the station's 'national responsibility to nurture the Irish language by presenting it in a sympathetic, positive and imaginative way', as well as extending the range of programmes, with particular regard to learners, children and light entertainment (*Progress Report*, 1967:60).

How did this commitment translate into actual performance in the 1960s? In terms of output, the level of Irish language programming rose from an average of 1.85 hours per week in 1963 to 3.26 hours per week in 1968, and from 4.2 per cent to 6.3 per cent of total television output (see Table 1). However, given the initial low base, the triumphant claim of the 1968 *Progress Report on the Restoration of the Irish Language* that 'more programmes in Irish were shown on television in the autumn and winter of 1967/8 than in any previous period', was somewhat complacent (cf. *Progress Report*, 1967:58).

The report also claimed a viewership for the current affairs programme *Féach* of up to 500,000 people. While viewership for other Irish language programmes did not quite scale these heights, it seems strange that RTE should have defended itself against criticism of its Irish language output on the grounds of the inherent non-commercial, unprofitable and minority interest nature of such programmes in view of audience ratings of this level. The report also asserted that children's programmes were now largely bilingual and that plays and serials in Irish now formed an important part of the station's output. In fact, in 1968, there was just one thirty minute play in Irish over the sample period and the output of children's programmes halved in absolute terms (and quartered as a percentage of total Irish output) compared with 1963. Nevertheless, the proliferation of programmes for learners of the language seemed to indicate a commitment to the restoration aspect of Irish language policy, defined as 'the displacement of English by Irish usage in as many of the spheres of national life as possible' (Bord na Gaeilge, 1983:40).

TABLE 1

AVERAGE IRISH WEEKLY OUTPUT AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TV OUTPUT.

| Year | Total Weekly Output (hours) | Irish Weekly Output (hours) | Irish as a % of Total |
|------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1963 | 43.5 | 1.85 | 4.2% |
| 1968 | 51.5 | 3.26 | 6.3% |
| 1973 | 52.3 | 2.80 | 5.4% |
| 1978 | 72.7 | 4.20 | 5.8% |
| 1983 | 109.9 | 3.40 | 3.1% |
| 1988 | 126.7 | 3.70 | 2.9% |
| 1993 | 172.4 | 4.89 | 2.8% |

The 1970s

This commitment to the restoration of the language continued to be evident in policy statements by RTE in the early 1970s. In 1971 the RTE Authority, chaired by Dónall O Móráin (current President of Gael-Linn) drew up a statement, *A View of Irish Broadcasting*, in respect of its understanding of its obligations in the field of cultural matters. While the statement reiterated the familiar warning that 'giving a disproportional place to Irish programmes could run the risk of creating resentment of the objective in view' as well as the equally familiar and ambiguous emphasis on quality rather than quantity, it also asserted that, in theory at least, RTE was still committed to the restoration of the language and that this commitment arose not simply because of its obligations under the broadcasting legislation, but in terms of its public service ethos. It stressed that (p.14):

even if the specific statutory provision in relation to the Irish language did not exist, the Authority would naturally, in common with broadcasting services in other countries catering for dual or multi-language situations, give due recognition to the intrinsic cultural value of the Irish language in the making of radio and television programmes... The Irish language policy, which has been defined as being aimed at making Irish a commonly spoken language in the community as a whole, requires full and imaginative cooperation from the broadcasting service.

Despite this statement of policy, by 1973 the output of programmes in the Irish language had fallen both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total output: down from 3.26 to 2.8 hours per week compared with 1968, and from 6.3 per cent to 5.4 per cent of total television output (see Table 1).

A similar picture can be seen with regard to the range of programming, one measure of the 'quality' of output to which RTE referred so frequently. As can be seen from Table 2, despite the Authority's emphasis on the restoration of the language, by 1973 programmes for learners of Irish had fallen considerably and there were no plays or serials at all during the sample period. *An Nuacht* now formed almost forty per cent of all Irish output, both because coverage of news had risen to almost double the 1968 level, and because Irish output as a whole had shrunk over the period. Therefore, RTE's stated commitment to the language was being matched by a contraction of both the level and range of programmes broadcast and by the domination of 'heavy', studio-bound material which was cheaper to produce.

TABLE 2

RANGE OF PROGRAMMING 1963-1993 (AVERAGE MINUTES PER WEEK)

| | Light Ent | Curr. Affairs | Child/ Youth | Sport | Learners/ Educ | News | Soap/ Drama | Total |
|------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|-------------------|------|----------------|------------|
| 1963 | 15 | 31 | 31 | 0 | 0 | 28 | 5 | 1.85 hours |
| 1968 | 30 | 38 | 14 | 0 | 81 | 30 | 5 | 3.26 hours |
| 1973 | 37 | 33 | 17 | 0 | 15 | 67 | 0 | 2.80 hours |
| 1978 | 37 | 36 | 24 | 12 | 41 | 93 | 7 | 4.20 hours |
| 1983 | 62 | 24 | 33 | 0 | 22 | 60 | 6 | 3.40 hours |
| 1988 | 33 | 72 | 16 | 17 | 0 | 49 | 0 | 2.90 hours |
| 1993 | 25 | 99 | 93 | 20 | 5 | 38 | 14 | 4.89 hours |

In fairness to RTE, there are dangers in drawing too many conclusion from what were (given the low base) relatively slight shifts in output over a five year period. The station's performance also needs to be viewed in the context of a gradual shift in public and state perceptions of the language throughout the 1970s from the traditional insular 'Gaelicness' of Irish identity in which language policy had been rooted, to a more open view of 'Irishness' within which the language policy had yet to find its feet. This shift was noticeable in the broadcasting policies of Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Conor Cruise O'Brien who, in the interests of promoting an 'open door' policy, proposed that BBC Northern Ireland (which at the time excluded any Irish language programmes), should be broadcast nationwide in lieu of a second Irish channel. This proposal was dropped following a decisive rejection by respondents in a national opinion poll.

Cruise O'Brien also amended the 1960 Broadcasting Authority Act in 1976 in the interests of promoting a broader view of Irish culture (particularly in the context of violence in Northern Ireland). As a result, the Irish language became more marginalized in legislative terms: whereas section 17 of the 1960 Act had obliged the RTE Authority to 'bear constantly in mind the *national aims of restoring*' the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture', section 13 of the amending legislation instead emphasized the Authority's responsibility to 'ensure that programmes reflect the varied elements which make up the culture of the people of the whole island of Ireland'. The 'national aim of restoring the Irish language' was replaced with the vague direction 'to have special regard to the elements which distinguish that culture, and in particular for the Irish language'. With the concept of a unified 'national culture' itself being played down, the basis for promoting Irish, and particularly restoring it within the context of 'the national culture' was inevitably sidelined.

In the face of these developments, RTE remained relatively proactive, at least in policy terms, towards the language, establishing an Advisory Committee in 1977 to advise it 'on how to discharge its statutory and other responsibilities in relation to Irish language programmes' (*Report to the Ministers for the Gaeltacht and Communications*, 1987:8). The establishment of the committee may have contributed to placing Irish higher on the agenda within RTE, given that output in 1978 showed an improvement compared with 1973 (see Table 1).

However, as a proportion of total television output, the improvement was less marked, principally due to the expansion of broadcasting hours with the introduction of Network 2 towards the end of 1978 with its overwhelming proportion of imported programmes. In terms of the range of programmes (see Tables 2 and 3), while sport made a brief appearance for the first time, the schedule remained dominated by broadcasts of *An Nuacht*.

1. Emphasis added.

The Advisory Committee reported in 1979 and recommended inter alia that (i) there should be a full range of programmes, with particular regard for children, young people, learners of the language, and sport; (ii) that *An Nuacht* should be broadcast in a consistent time slot between 7p.m. to 10p.m.; and (iii) that there should be one 'worthwhile' programme in Irish for adults on television every day. Almost identical recommendations had been reported as implemented ten years earlier, according to the 1968 *Progress Report on the Restoration of the Irish Language*, (1969).

TABLE 3
RANGE OF PROGRAMMING 1963-1993
(AS A PROPORTION OF THE AVERAGE WEEKLY OUTPUT OF IRISH PROGRAMMES)

| | Light Ent | Curr. Affairs | Child/ Youth | Sport | Learners/ Educ | News | Soap/ Drama | Total |
|------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|-------------------|------|----------------|-------|
| 1963 | 14% | 29% | 29% | 0% | 0% | 25% | 4% | 100% |
| 1968 | 15% | 18% | 7% | 0% | 41% | 15% | 3% | 100% |
| 1973 | 22% | 19% | 10% | 0% | 9% | 39% | 0% | 100% |
| 1978 | 15% | 14% | 10% | 5% | 17% | 37% | 3% | 100% |
| 1983 | 30% | 12% | 2% | 14% | 10% | 29% | 3% | 100% |
| 1988 | 15% | 32% | 19% | 8% | 0% | 22% | 0% | 100% |
| 1993 | 8% | 34% | 32% | 7% | 2% | 13% | 4% | 100% |

The 1980s

While the Committee's recommendations had been accepted 'in principle' by RTE, by 1983 Irish language output was once again on the decline, falling from 4.2 hours per week in 1978 to 3.4 hours in 1983. As a proportion of total broadcasting hours, the decline was even more striking (see Table 1). Despite an improvement in the coverage of Light Entertainment programmes (principally due to *Trom agus Éadrom*), children's programmes had practically disappeared from the schedule, with just one five minute programme per week, *Dilín Ó Deamhas*, broadcast for part of the year.

These results are to be viewed in the context of RTE's commitment to twenty per cent of its home production being in Irish, an objective which, in contrast to its previous policy of 'quality not quantity', it had set for itself in the late 1970s. By 1983, with Irish language programmes accounting for just 3.1 per cent of total output (or six to seven per cent of home production), the target was looking increasingly unrealistic. In 1987 the Authority announced that it no longer wished to adhere to it, but would instead 'seek to implement the objectives of the Report of the Advisory Committee' (which had apparently been gathering dust in the meantime), and would aim to provide 'a satisfactory range of programmes in Irish spanning the broad spectrum of viewers' interests' (*Report to the Ministers for the Gaeltacht and Communications*, 1987:4). RTE also warned against:

a somewhat simplistic approach by some people to the whole question of television programme-making... The way to improve Irish language programmes – both in quantity and quality – is by careful planning and encouragement with a view to getting the public to accept these programmes. Evolution, rather than revolution is the motto.

(*Report to the Ministers* 1987:5)

RTE's reservations were not without justification, given that Irish language organizations, like any lobby group, have tended to view RTE output from their own perspective and therefore may not have taken sufficient account of general viewer

resistance to watching such programmes, as opposed to considering them to be 'a good thing' in opinion poll responses. Nevertheless, by 1987 RTE had already had over twenty five years to encourage such evolution.

Throughout the 1980s RTE's financial position had been steadily disimproving. The passing of the Radio and Television Act 1988 and Broadcasting Act 1990 provided for the introduction of legal commercial radio and as yet an unrealized television station which undermined RTE's monopoly position. The capping of the station's advertising revenue added to these difficulties. In the face of these threats, RTE was anxious to underline its own advantages, particularly its commitment to public service broadcasting. Its 1988 *Annual Report* stressed that:

RTE believes that broadcasting is not necessarily about profit or power or even about huge listenership. The reflection and stimulation of social and cultural values while holding audience interest and loyalty at a substantial level is the core of RTE's achievement.

This commitment seemed somewhat hollow as far as the Irish language was concerned, with Irish programmes forming just 2.9 per cent of total television output in 1988, its lowest ever level (see Table 1). Current affairs and news programmes continued to dominate the schedule, although children's programmes showed some improvement.

While RTE's financial difficulties played a role in its diminishing production of Irish language programmes, it seemed that when RTE was threatened, it used its public service ethos (according to which broadcasting is not about 'profit, power or even a huge listenership') as a defence against commercial competition, but when criticized for failing to implement its stated public service commitments, it quoted low audience figures and commercial imperatives in mitigation of its performance. In a pamphlet issued in 1989 entitled *The Future of Broadcasting in Ireland*, RTE once again committed itself to increasing the level and range of Irish language programmes and added that it 'had committed a significant proportion of resources to the achievement of this aim'. Just how significant those resources were is difficult to ascertain given the lack of a breakdown between English and Irish language programming costs in RTE's annual reports. However, in 1985/6 when Irish language programmes (excluding news) constituted around 8 per cent of home production, they were allocated only 5 per cent of the home production budget, or £278,804 (*Report to the Ministers for the Gaeltacht and Communications*, 1987:11).

The 1990s

While it is too early to make judgements on RTE's Irish language performance in the 1990s, there seems to have been some improvement. Output has risen to an average of 4.89 hours per week (reaching six hours some weeks) but is continuing to decline as a proportion of total television output (see Table 1). There has also been an improvement in the range of programmes broadcast, particularly in the area of children's programmes and, finally, the production of a pilot series for an Irish 'soap', *Ros na Rún* (See Tables 2 and 3).

Output, range and scheduling

Taking the period 1963-1993 as a whole, while the output of Irish language programmes rose from an average of 15.8 minutes per day in 1963 to 41.9 minutes per day in 1993, progress was far from steady so that it would be premature to see the improvement in 1993 as the start of a renaissance. In addition, Irish language output has failed to keep pace with the increase in television output as a whole, falling from 4.2 per cent in 1963 to 2.8 per cent in 1993. It is worth noting that in recent years, an increasing proportion of RTE's Irish language output has been commissioned from the

independent sector, a source which may contract when TnG comes on air. Finance for RTE's Irish language output may also be cut back when TnG begins broadcasting, particularly if RTE is obliged to provide a substantial share of TnG's daily output in addition to its own commitments. Already, plans for a further series of *Ros na Rún* have been shelved because the original sponsors, Udarás na Gaeltachta, announced they would not be providing funding for the project and RTE were not willing to provide the finance themselves.

As can be seen from Table 4, there have been considerable variations in the relative share of different programme types over the past thirty years. To some extent this has reflected prevailing emphases, for example, programmes for learners in 1968 which have since virtually disappeared from the schedule. In years when the output of Irish language programmes was low, news and current affairs programmes have tended to dominate. A consistent feature has been the absence of sport in Irish, apart from the occasional GAA final. Overall, the erratic nature of the range of output highlights a lack of consistency in long term policy and objectives.

Programmes such as *Ros na Rún* are evidence of the importance of scheduling in the ability of Irish language programmes to attract viewers: the series attracted an average of 380,000 viewers (12 per cent of the total potential audience), far in excess of the usual TAM ratings for Irish language programmes. While a number of factors probably contributed to *Ros na Rún*'s success in this area – such as its novelty value and the fact that non-fluent speakers could follow it – the scheduling of the programme (immediately following the 6.01 news on RTE1 during the Christmas period 1992) was also a major factor.

In the past RTE has been criticized for scheduling Irish language programmes at off-peak hours or constantly switching their time-slots, thus inhibiting the building up of a core audience. From RTE's point of view, there is a temptation to schedule programmes with lower audience ratings at off-peak hours, creating a Catch 22 situation: critics have argued that if such programmes are broadcast in unattractive time-slots or scheduling is erratic, the expectation that these programmes will attract few viewers turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophesy. In part, of course, scheduling is determined by the type of programme broadcast, e.g. children's programmes in the afternoon. While Table 4 indicates that Irish language programmes have not, by and large, been broadcast at off-peak hours in recent years, there have nevertheless been frequent arbitrary changes in the scheduling of individual programmes.

TABLE 4

PROGRAMME SCHEDULING 1963-1993
(AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL IRISH OUTPUT FOR EACH YEAR)

| | 9-1pm | 1-4pm | 4-6pm | 6-7pm | 7-8pm | 8-9pm | 9-10pm | 10-11 | 11-12 | Total |
|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1963 | 0% | 0% | 32% | 13% | 0% | 14% | 0% | 23% | 20% | 100% |
| 1968 | 8% | 13% | 13% | 23% | 26% | 15% | 3% | 0% | 0% | 100% |
| 1973 | 6% | 3% | 0% | 10% | 56% | 3% | 15% | 0% | 7% | 100% |
| 1978 | 6% | 12% | 20% | 7% | 14% | 0% | 7% | 26% | 9% | 100% |
| 1983 | 1% | 3% | 7% | 12% | 17% | 18% | 0% | 28% | 4% | 100% |
| 1988 | 0% | 9% | 7% | 5% | 20% | 55% | 0% | 5% | 0% | 100% |
| 1993 | 6% | 28% | 7% | 17% | 36% | 4% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 100% |

Even *An Nuacht*, one of the few consistent features of Irish language output, has undergone considerably more variations in its time-slot, programme length and channel than one would expect even over a thirty year period (see Table 5).

News programmes are generally one of the most stable features of a station's schedule, and it would be unimaginable for RTE's English language news to undergo the same degree of change. At best it indicates that Irish language programmes are more dispensable in the eyes of schedulers than their English language counterparts.

TABLE 5

SCHEDULING OF AN NUACHT 1963-1993

| Year | Length (minutes) | Channel | Time Slot |
|--------|------------------|---------|--------------------|
| 1963 | 5 | RTE | 10-11pm or 11-12pm |
| 1968 | 5 | RTE | 7-8pm |
| 1973 | 10 | RTE | 7-8pm |
| 1978 | weekend 5-10 | RTE1 | 7-8pm |
| | weekday 5-10 | RTE1 | 5-6pm |
| | & 10-15 | RTE 1 | 10-11pm or 11-12pm |
| 1983 | weekend 5 | N2 | 8-9pm |
| | weekday 5-15 | RTE 1 | 10-11pm |
| Nov 83 | weekend 5-10 | N2 | 7-8pm |
| | weekday 15 | N2 | 7-8pm |
| 1988 | weekend 5 | N2 | 8-9pm |
| | weekday 5-10 | N2 | 7-8pm or 8-9pm |
| mid yr | weekend 5 | N2 | 6-7pm or 7-8pm |
| | weekday 5 | N2 | 7-8pm |
| 1993 | weekend 5 | N2 | 6-7pm |
| | weekday 5-8 | N2 | 6-7pm or 7-8pm |

The fate of *An Nuacht* is also indicative of the shift in Irish language programmes from RTE1 to Network 2 (see Table 6). While the creation of a specific two hour niche on Network 2 had been recommended in the past as an alternative to the creation of a separate Irish language television channel, it was also recognized that even a Network 2 slot could create the danger of ghettoizing the language, cutting down on the possibility of attracting less regular or 'chance' viewers, a danger which is even more relevant to *Teilifis na Gaeilge*.

TABLE 6

IRISH AS A PROPORTION OF OUTPUT ON RTE 1 AND NETWORK 2

| | |
|------|---|
| 1978 | 10.2% of RTE 1 output 1.9% of Network 2 output |
| 1983 | 3.7% of RTE 1 output 2.45 of Network 2 output |
| 1988 | 1.4% of RTE 1 output 4.8% of Network 2 output |
| 1993 | 0.4% of RTE 1 output 5.6% of Network 2 output |

Audience

While the justification for Irish language broadcasting on television does not depend solely on audience levels – its actual justification being a matter of dispute – audience figures do give some indication of how successfully policies are working. Despite RTE's thirty years of experience in the field, the station has very little information with regard to either who is watching or why. Its main source of audience information is TAM ratings, which give purely quantitative information for individual programmes and therefore do not provide an overall profile of the Irish language audience. Nor can TAM ratings tell us, for example, what proportion of the Irish language audience is Gaeltacht-based or whether potential viewers are turned off through lack of comprehension, lack of interest, or both.

Census returns and, more accurately, a number of qualitative surveys carried out by the MRBI, the Committee on Language Attitudes Research and Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, suggest that just over two thirds of the national population have little or no oral/aural Irish language skills. Of the remaining thirty-one per cent, approximately three per cent are fluent, a further eleven per cent have competent speaking and comprehension skills and the other seventeen per cent have some limited competence in the language (Stokes, Kennedy, Crowley/Údarás na Gaeltachta, 1989: 19-20).

A report commissioned in 1989 by Udarás na Gaeltachta suggested that the two to four per cent of the population who regularly watch 'pure' (as opposed to bilingual) Irish programmes on RTE, were drawn from the fourteen per cent of the population with high language competence. The report also suggested that the main audience for the new Irish language station would also be drawn from this fourteen per cent core. While TnG may have some success in increasing the proportion of this core who regularly watch Irish language programmes, its ability to expand such viewership significantly is questionable: fluent Irish speakers, no less than their monolingual counterparts, are unlikely to be weaned off their current viewing habits simply because an Irish language alternative has become available. It is of interest that current viewing levels of *Cúrsaí* are no higher in the Gaeltacht than in the country as a whole. If TnG were to be simply a visual equivalent of Raidió na Gaeltachta, i.e. primarily a regional broadcasting service, it might attract more Gaeltacht viewers but it is likely that this would be at the expense of losing audience share among Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht. Raidió na Gaeltachta attracts just one per cent of the national audience.

While TnG's main audience will be the fourteen per cent 'core' of competent speakers, it is also seeking to attract a more general audience from among the seventeen per cent of the population with some comprehension ability. RTE currently reaches this audience to some extent in three ways: (i) bilingual programmes; (ii) expensive productions such as *Ros na Rún* and (iii) through 'piggybacking' i.e. viewers who catch a few minutes of an Irish programme while waiting for another programmes to start. TnG will be unable to avail of the 'piggyback' effect; there may be resistance to the 'dilution' of programmes on the new station if bilingual programmes are broadcast; and there is a limit, even with substantial funding, to the number of expensive programmes with mass-appeal TnG will be able to produce without compromising the quality of its other programmes. While RTE has stated its commitment to maintaining the level of its Irish language output when TnG comes on air, such commitments have been made, and broken, in the past when the station encountered financial difficulties. If RTE loses a significant proportion of its core, regular audience to TnG, it may either reduce the level of output or move such programmes to off-peak hours to minimize the loss of advertising revenue, thus reducing the potential to reach less fluent or committed viewers through 'piggybacking'.

Therefore, while TnG is likely to result in a greater choice and range of programmes for committed viewers of Irish language programmes, the potential for significantly increasing the number of such viewers is limited and its audience is likely to be composed in part of viewers 'cannibalized' from RTE. Any gains made in increasing the

number of 'core' viewers may be at the expense of occasional, less fluent RTE viewers, thus inhibiting rather than promoting the visibility and extension of Irish in the population as a whole.

Why Teilifís na Gaeilge?

These dangers raise the question of why TnG is being established at all: is it an implicit recognition on the part of policy makers that the extension of Irish – as opposed to its maintenance – has now been completely abandoned?

The decision to establish TnG is a product of a number of factors, not all of which relate purely to language considerations. Firstly, the fact that the 'compulsory' nature of Irish which informed past language policies is no longer acceptable. This is not to say the population has turned against the language, but the majority now view it with a benign indifference: by all means support the language, but don't shove it down our throats. Teilifís na Gaeilge will therefore provide viewers who are anxious to watch Irish language programmes with the choice of so doing, without impinging on the viewing choices of the less committed.

Secondly, the demand for a separate station has been influenced by campaigns among other European minority language groups such as the Basques and Bretons for a reversal of previous attempts to absorb their distinct culture and traditions into a homogeneous national culture. Television, in particular, is seen as an important 'civil right' in this context. This trend is evident in the justification given by Michael D. Higgins for the new station, viz. that

every individual, every people, every language, every culture has basic rights. The authorities must recognise these rights and ensure that they are provided with the necessary resources for broadcasting and self expression through the broadcasting medium (*Higgins, 1993a*).

This emphasis on 'rights' has been taken up in particular by the denizens of the Gaeltacht, who have located their arguments for a separate Irish station within broader regional demands against a perceived 'internal colonialism' by the Dublin elite, including the field of broadcasting. Consequently, their demands have tended to focus not just on a separate station, but a station 'of their own'. The decline in native speakers within the Gaeltacht, particularly among children, is seen as sound evidence that unless policies prioritize the protection of the core language area, the future survival of the language is threatened. This argument is rejected by those who see a repeat of Raidió na Gaeltachta audience levels if Gaeltacht pressure yields results. It is the perception that Irish belongs only to the Gaeltacht, they argue, that has reinforced its image as reactive and middle-aged, precipitating its rejection by the young.

In addition to these language issues, the impetus to set up Teilifís na Gaeilge is rooted in wider developments in the field of broadcasting, for example the trend, evident in both Ireland and other European countries, to move away from a single national broadcasting service and towards a more fragmented and competitive marketplace in which the 'national' audience has split into local markets or niches. This trend has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on the economic as opposed to the purely cultural aspects of broadcasting, particularly the job-creation potential in the independent production sector. The location of the station within the Gaeltacht can therefore be seen as a compromise between Gaeltacht and national demands: the station will be broadcast to the national audience, but the economic benefits will accrue to the Gaeltacht where independent Irish language producers are concentrated.

Conclusion

To return to the questions posed at the beginning of this article, it is clear that despite thirty years of Irish language broadcasting and RTE's public service and legislative obligations towards the language, the station has been unsuccessful in fulfilling its own stated commitments to the language. This in part arises from the perception that Irish language programmes are inherently unlikely to attract large audiences which, given RTE's dependence on advertising and its need to compete for viewers with British and satellite stations, is a significant consideration. It would seem to suggest that if RTE were to be given even a fraction of the proposed running cost of *Teilifis na Gaeilge* (variously estimated at between £18m and £21m per year) it would be able to produce programmes such as *Ros na Rún* which are expensive but which attract large audiences, particularly viewers who would not normally watch Irish language programmes. To this extent, if the aim were to use television to promote Irish among the widest possible audience, it would seem preferable to provide RTE with specific funding for Irish language programmes instead of establishing a separate channel.

Teilifis na Gaeilge, on the other hand, is likely to provide a better range and output of Irish language programmes for existing speakers of the language or those willing to make an effort to improve their Irish than would ever have been possible on RTE. This is because RTE, irrespective of how much money were thrown at it, would be unlikely to ever provide the two hours per day of Irish language broadcasting proposed in the 1987 *Report to the Ministers for the Gaeltacht and Communications* (1987:18). RTE's general viewership may be happy enough to see a certain amount of Irish language broadcasting: the thought of being faced with three hours daily might be greeted with less enthusiasm, particularly among audiences without access to alternative viewing on foreign stations.

Despite the problems the new station may face – particularly with regard to balancing the needs of the Gaeltacht audience, Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht, and the general population – a more significant threat to both the station and the language is the danger of unrealistic expectations.

The perception that television is incredibly powerful, with the ability to either save or destroy a language and culture has informed much of the debate on TnG, just as thirty years ago it influenced the decision to establish RTE. English language television has been perceived as the most important factor undermining the transmission of Irish to children, and by corollary, a separate station is being hailed as the white knight which will save it, not least by Michael D. Higgins who has proclaimed that 'the whole future of the Irish language depends on the new *Teilifis na Gaeilge* service' (Higgins 1993b).

Despite the proliferation of new minority language stations throughout Europe, there is little hard evidence to support this view. While television, in conjunction with other policy initiatives, may have a role to play in supporting a minority language, its ability either to penetrate the passivity of most people towards Irish or to modernize its perception among children and teenagers may be more limited than is claimed. Too much optimism, as past language policies confirm, can sometimes be as lethal as too little.

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